



POLICY ALERT
MARCH 2008

THE Center for Education Reform



BOSTON CHARTER SCHOOLS¹

Champions of School Achievement

Today

Over recent years, Bostonians have seen many different champions emerge. The Red Sox finally broke the curse and won two World Series in four years. The New England Patriots have become one of the most dominant football teams in history, winning three Superbowls. And, the Boston Celtics are primed to have rousing success in the NBA playoffs.

While these champions are praised and talked about repeatedly in the media, one champion in Beantown has gone largely unnoticed - charter schools. Charters have been an important part of education reform in Boston and across the state, offering choice and opportunity for children, especially in low-income areas, and prompting reforms in conventional district schools.

The recent study by the Boston Foundation lauded the accomplishments of pilot schools in the city. However, Boston's charter schools are making huge strides in raising student achievement scores to unprecedented levels, and many are doing better than pilot schools. The Boston media has focused on the success of pilot schools as a way for entrenched interests to downplay and block parents' access to the often more successful charter schools. And while the pilot schools have been recognized, it's important to highlight Boston's true winners of education achievement and improvement - charter schools.

KEY FINDINGS:

- ⊙ Charter school students in Boston have made impressive academic gains and surpass the scores of students in pilot schools and conventional public schools on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). In eighth grade math alone, charter school students outperformed their district peers by as much as 50 percentage points.
- ⊙ In 2007, there were 5,649 applications for 1,249 spots in Boston charter schools. While the demand for quality school options is high, a repressive cap on the number of charter schools in Boston has recently been met, offering no hope to students and parents wanting a better choice.
- ⊙ As Massachusetts embarks on its 15th year as a model for education reform, lawmakers and educators are at a crossroads. Will they continue to expand educational excellence in the Bay State through charter schools by eliminating the enrollment cap and impact aid, or retreat from offering this important choice for families?

WHY CHOICE IN BOSTON?

Freedom and accountability for schools are the heart of any successful reform effort. Charters are innovative public schools that are open by choice, accountable for results and free from most rules and regulations governing conventional public schools. These schools give more options to inner-city parents and more freedom to principals and teachers. Charter schools have managed to raise student achievement scores far above the conventional public schools. Boston's pilot schools have also made gains. Both types of schools should be recognized for their efforts.



courtesy of Boston Charter School Alliance

Demand for choice in Boston is at an all-time high, but the Massachusetts charter law is preventing new charters from being created. Districts cannot spend more than nine percent of their funds on charter schools. Because of this stipulation in the charter law, Boston, and many other urban districts in the state, such as Chelsea, Lynn, Springfield, and Lawrence, are starting to hit their cap and no new schools can open. The last Boston charter school was recently approved to open, putting the city at the arbitrary nine percent cap limit. There are no pilot schools scheduled to open, since the teachers' union has blocked those school conversions as well. In 2007, there were 5,649 applications for 1,249 spots in Boston charter schools (Boston Charter School Alliance, 2007). With no new charters on the horizon these parents are put on waiting lists, hoping their child's name will be called so they can attend a high-performing charter school.

Because of the Massachusetts cap on charters in low-performing districts, Boston's best charter leaders face a choice if they seek to grow. They can open charters in the suburbs to serve middle-class students. Or they can move away to other states, to open more schools to serve students most in need. All have chosen the latter, lured to open schools elsewhere, notably for Mayor Bloomberg in New York City.

WHO ATTENDS CHARTERS?

Contrary to the flawed data that has been released over the years, charter schools do not "cherry pick" the best students from conventional public schools. Half of charter school students around the country fall into categories defined as at-risk (51 percent), minority (53 percent), or low-income (54 percent), according to CER's *Annual Survey of America's Charter Schools*. And Boston charter schools are no different. The students in Boston charters are similar to students in conventional Boston public schools.*

| Charter Schools | Pilot Schools | Boston Public Schools |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 67% qualify for free & reduced lunch | 71% qualify for free & reduced lunch | 77% qualify for free & reduced lunch |
| 61% are African-American | 46% are African-American | 43% are African-American |
| 12% are special needs students | 15% are special needs students | 21% are special needs students |

* Note: Using 2007 enrollment data from the Massachusetts Department of Education, percentage of enrollment is weighted based on school size.

<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/enrollmentbyracegender.aspx?mode=school&orderBy=&year=2007>

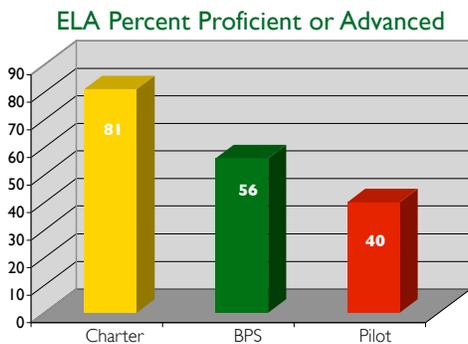
<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/selectedpopulations.aspx?mode=school&orderBy=&year=2007>

Charter schools in Boston enroll a higher percentage of African-American students compared to the district as a whole (61 percent to 43 percent). Pilot high schools, however, enroll fewer struggling students, students with severe special needs and students with limited English skills ("Students in Boston's 'pilot' schools," *Education Week*, November 14, 2007).

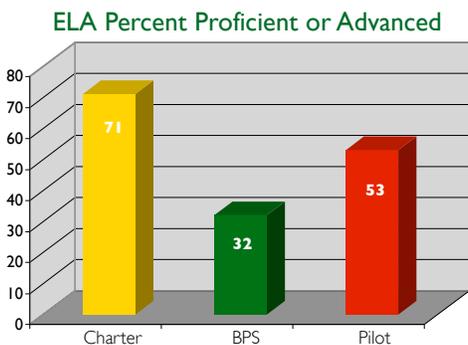
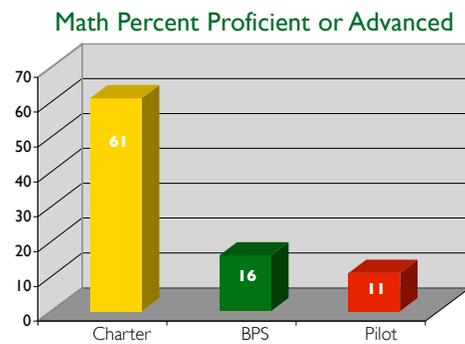


CHARTER SCHOOLS RECEIVE TOP MARKS IN ACHIEVEMENT

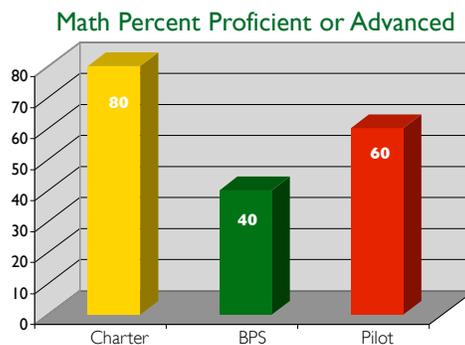
While Boston pilot schools have better achievement results than conventional public schools, they are still the runner-up to charter schools. On the eighth and tenth grade 2007 MCAS tests, charter school students scored on average much higher than pilot school and conventional public school students. At the eighth grade level in math, charters scored 44 percentage points higher than conventional Boston public school students and 50 percentage points higher than pilot schools. In English language arts (ELA), charters scored 35 percentage points higher than conventional public school students and 41 percentage points higher than pilot schools. In eighth and tenth grade math achievement, the top three schools out of all Boston public schools are charter schools.



8th Grade



10th Grade



Source: 2007 MCAS, The Massachusetts Department of Education, <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/mcas.aspx>.

Despite the similar student populations as measured by race and poverty among all three types of schools, critics of the success of Boston charter schools often point to the lower percentage of charter school students that are special needs. First, there is only about a nine percent difference among special education populations in charter schools and conventional public schools. Second, charter schools' average achievement is so much higher than pilot schools and BPS, that even accounting for the special education population difference, charter schools would still come out on top.

CONCLUSION

In a city like Boston where an achievement gap persists, it is important to have as many quality education options as possible. Charter schools and pilot schools are both doing their job in offering innovative, accountable public school choices to the parents of Boston. And while both show impressive academic results above conventional Boston public schools, charter schools have done an even more tremendous job in engaging students and ensuring their academic success. Many of the charter schools in Boston are known throughout the country as some of the strongest in the nation and other states have looked into modeling schools after high-achieving Beantown charters.

MVPs OF BOSTON CHARTER SCHOOLS

Excel Academy, located in East Boston serves a student population that is majority Latino (64 percent). Excel outperformed their local and state peers on the 2007 math and English MCAS exams in every grade level. Their 91 percent proficient rate in math was double the state average of 45 percent, more than triple the rate of Boston's 27 percent and Chelsea's 17 percent and significantly outpaced the statewide caucasian average of 52 percent. The Excel Academy was also honored by CER in 2007 as one of the nation's 53 Charter Schools of the Year.

The Edward Brooke Charter School, a K-8 college preparatory school has seen extraordinary achievement results serving a large minority population since opening in 2002. On the 2007 MCAS, eighth graders were ranked fifth out of all Boston public schools for their scores in math, fourth for their scores in science, and ninth for their language arts proficiency. The school has been praised by the *Boston Globe* for its, "strict discipline, rigorous academic expectations, and dedicated teachers..." ("Charter School Draws Raves, Hits," *Boston Globe*, March 7, 2004)

Boston Preparatory Charter School in Hyde Park has proved that their eight-hour school day, longer school year and tremendous work pays off. Boston Prep students surpassed their peers across Boston and the entire state of Massachusetts on the 2007 MCAS. Ninety-eight percent of eighth graders scored proficient or advanced in English Language Arts, ranking it second out of Boston public schools. Eighty-four percent of eighth grade students scored proficient or advanced in math, ranking Boston Prep third.

However, the charter school cap has been met in Boston, allowing for no new schools to be approved. The cap needs to be lifted to continue expansion across the state. Charter lotteries, where thousands of parents hope to win a spot in a school, are evidence of the demand throughout Massachusetts.

Critics of charter schools often say that charter schools take away money from the school district. This could not be further from the truth, especially in Massachusetts. The state provides one of the most generous reimbursement plans in the nation when students choose to leave conventional public schools for charter schools. There is a three-year program, where every time a dollar is transferred from the district to a charter, the district receives 100 percent back the first year, 60 percent the second year, and 40 percent the third year. The district is receiving tax dollars for children they are not even educating and yet with all these added resources, still fall on average 30 percentage points below charter school students on the statewide assessment.

In addition, since the charter era began in Massachusetts in 1993, the Boston Public School District has seen a spectacular rise in the amount of money it spends per student, "despite" the students who have chosen to attend charter schools. How can a district, which has nearly doubled its per pupil spending since 1993, a district with the single highest average teacher salaries in Massachusetts (higher than every nearby wealthy suburb), complain that they are being drained of funds?



courtesy of Boston Charter School Alliance

The need for education options in Boston and the entire state of Massachusetts is clear. Charter schools have been the most important path to raising the bar on student achievement. Their accomplishments and potential cannot be overlooked any longer. Rather than blind allegiance to the status quo, a bold commitment to improving the state's charter school law within the next year is critical to the success of Massachusetts' children. Lawmakers, educators and education reformers need to believe in policies that will lift the cap, embrace common sense funding models and expand opportunities for quality charters to grow and replicate.

THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM

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